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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000640

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: POSSIBILITY OF A NEEDED SAFE HAVEN FOR PALESTINIANS

REF: 2006 BAGHDAD 4748

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR MARGARET SCOBAY. FOR REASON
S 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Security and living conditions at the Baladiat housing complex for Palestinians in Baghdad remain poor. Residents of the 864-apartment compound report that Jaysh al-Mahdi militias continue to attack and assault them. The apartments are overcrowded, even if they are sparsely furnished because its inhabitants have sold most of their belongings to cope with increasing levels of poverty. Like other Palestinians in Baghdad, Baladiat's residents would like to leave Iraq -- or at least Baghdad -- but have no place to go. Should assistance be made available, it is probable that Palestinians in Baghdad would settle somewhere else in Iraq. One possibility is Salah ad Din, where the Governor has stated that Palestinians would be welcomed. End summary.

Visit to Baladiat compound

¶2. (SBU) On December 13, the Refugee Assistant --a locally employed staff member-- visited the Baladiat compound in Baghdad, which is home to an estimated 10,000 Palestinians. The RefAssistant spoke with Palestinian families about security and living conditions in the compound. The families explained that there are two kinds of apartments in the complex, a 75 square meters (807 square feet) one bedroom apartment --consisting of bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and living room-- and a larger 90 square meters (968 square feet) two-bedroom apartment. The smaller units house one or two families, while the larger may be shared by up to three. Each family is generally comprised of six members. RefAssistant observed that the apartments were sparsely furnished, as families have been selling their belongings to cope with lost of income because of underemployment or unemployment. The families reported that those who have jobs work as teachers, taxi drivers, bakers, grocers, store clerks, or selling fuel, among other occupations. During the visit, RefAssitant observed Iraqi traders roaming the neighborhood to buy the Palestinians' possessions.

Assault, kidnappings and torture

¶3. (C) A middle-age female resident told the RefAssistant --a female herself-- about the brutality brought upon them by Shia militias. In addition to mortar attacks, this resident spoke about militias raping Palestinian women. She told the RefAssistant her own personal story of sexual abuse, stating that she was raped in her apartment in front of her husband, who was held at gun-point while the violation was taking place. Since then, she said, her husband has distanced himself from her, as he is unsure about how to come to terms with what the community's cultural tradition considers a

breach of honor, despite the fact that his attitude inflicts more agony on his wife. Other families spoke about Palestinians kidnapped and later found dead in sidewalks or ditches with marks of torture. If the body appeared with eyes gouged, residents claimed, it was an Al-Mahdi killing. Perforation (possibly made with electric drills) or severed limbs were tell-signs of a Badr brigades killing. Palestinians in the community provided the RefAssistant with an electronic document with information about killings and murders, including detail photographs of the mutilated bodies. A January of 2007 report about Palestinians in Iraq by the American NGO International Medical Corps (IMC) mentions that 190 Palestinian men and women have been murdered or tortured since 2003. UNHCR has also reported on allegations of torture and murder, but has not provided definite numbers, given the difficulties of confirming this kind of information.

Tikrit as a safe haven

¶4. (C) While there are incentives on the part of the Palestinians to report as fact estimates on the numbers of Palestinians killed in order to call attention to their plight, there is no doubt that Palestinians, like many Iraqis, have been brutally victimized by militias' death squads and by terrorists (reftel). Unlike Sunni or Shia Iraqis, however, Palestinians lack tribal links that would ease their integration and provide them with support in other parts of the country. One privilege that many Palestinians have is that of free housing in government-owned compounds or leased for them by UNHCR. It is a commodity that many Palestinians do not want to lose (especially the poor and

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the most vulnerable), and also one of the reasons why they are targeted.

¶5. (C) Many Palestinians have reportedly fled to neighboring countries on fake or illegally obtained Iraqi passports (note: Palestinians, as stateless refugees, have no passports of their own. End note.) Baladiat residents told the RefAssistant that the going price for a fake Iraqi passport is \$1,000, and that some 3,000 Palestinians have left the country with such fake documents. (Note: While the progressive introduction of the machine-readable G passport may make it more difficult to fake passports, for the time being Arab countries continue to accept the older, Iraqi S series passports. End note). Palestinians who have not left Iraq are likely to include those who can not afford to pay for the false documents or who can not take care of themselves.

¶6. (C) Palestinians would welcome moving outside of Baghdad if there would be assistance to help them set up a new home in another location. One possible location for a new Palestinian settlement outside Baghdad is Salah ad Din (SaD).

In a February 14 meeting with PRT SaD reps, SaD Governor Hamad Hamoud al Shakti al Qaisi said the province would welcome Palestinians who are fleeing violence in other areas of Iraq. Very supportive of the idea, he said he would be willing to designate an area in the city of Tikrit for the refugees, though he noted that they would likely need support in finding/constructing adequate housing. Conscience of his pan Arab nationalistic image, the Governor said he had already welcomed the Palestinians to the province in a previous news interview with Salah ad Din satellite TV station and that he would have the interview re-played. On a separate meeting with the RefCoord, the Director of the American NGO Mercy Corps estimated that an NGO program to assist refugee families resettle in a new location outside of Baghdad could cost about \$15,000 per family per year, for a period of two to three years. This estimate would include housing, infrastructure, and vocational training.

17. (SBU) Comment: A pilot program to move 200 of the most vulnerable Palestinians from Baghdad to Tikrit could cost USD 3 million a year, for two to three years. Salah ad Din is a mostly Sunni province with insurgent activity but free of sectarian violence. PRM should consider supporting such a pilot program which, as security conditions allow, could also provide a platform from which Palestinians refugees could be accessible for possible third country resettlement. End comment.
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